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SUBJECT: ONTARIO PURSUES DRIVERS' LICENSES AS PASSPORT ALTERNATIVE

Sensitive But Unclassified - protect accordingly.

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Ontario plans to issue a secure drivers' license by the end of 2007 that provincial officials hope can be used to document identity and citizenship in lieu of passports for travel across the U.S. border. The initial, informal plan for use of the card to cross into the U.S. would require the creation of a new database, dependent on Canadian federal citizenship information, to which American authorities would have access. The plan is sufficiently complex that its quick implementation is unlikely. END SUMMARY.

McGuinty Politicizes Long-Planned License Upgrade

2. (SBU) Ontario will begin issuing new drivers' licenses with upgraded security by the end of 2007. The new licenses will have new security features, including holograms, high-quality printing, and laser engraving. As their current five-year licenses expire, Ontario's 8.7 million licensed drivers will receive the secure licenses. Ontario has reportedly contracted with an outside vendor to produce the new licenses; previously, Ontario produced all licenses in-house. The new licenses are expected to cost drivers the same as the old licenses - C\$125 for new applicants and C\$75 for renewals.

3. (SBU) Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty wants Ontarians to be able to use these licenses in lieu of passports for travel across the U.S. border. McGuinty reportedly expects other provinces and territories to follow Ontario in a national movement to push the Canadian and U.S. federal governments to accept secure drivers' licenses in place of passports.

4. (SBU) An Ontario Ministry of Transportation (MoT) official told us that the secure drivers' license initiative has been planned for a long time, and will be implemented regardless of whether the licenses are accepted as a border-crossing document. He said Premier McGuinty, rather than Ministry officials, wanted to also push the secure license as a border-crossing card. MoT is following the British Columbia-Washington State pilot program closely. Our contact also said that the MoT had been in talks with Michigan about a pilot project, but that Michigan's governor's office and its transportation division disagreed between themselves about whether to move ahead.

Showing Citizenship: Federal Help Needed

5. (SBU) The MoT source said that Ontario has not decided how to reflect drivers' citizenship on the new licenses. The determination of citizenship is a federal issue, and though Ontario has initiated discussions with the federal government, agreement on the issue will take time. In any case, he said that it was unlikely that citizenship would be printed on the license because of concerns about privacy and the potential for profiling by the police.

6. (SBU) Under the preliminary plan, our MoT contact indicated that

drivers who wished to use their secure drivers' licenses as a border crossing card would have to fill out a separate application and pay an additional fee of C\$5-C\$10. The Ministry of Transportation would then send the applicant's information to the Canadian federal government for a determination of citizenship and eligibility. If the applicant qualified, their information would be entered into a NEXUS-type database, to which U.S. and Canadian authorities would have access. When an Ontario resident tried to use the drivers' license to cross the border, the border security official would query this database to confirm the crosser's identity.

Is Ontario's MoT Up To The Task?

¶7. (SBU) A 2005 report by Ontario's auditor general uncovered a number of problems with Ontario's licensing system, not all of which have been corrected. For example, the MoT is still using outdated computer technology; though there have been intermittent updates, the core system reportedly dates from the 1960's. Also, though Ontario has recently tightened its identification requirements, it formerly issued licenses to applicants identified only by non-secure documents, like shopping club cards.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: Using new secure drivers' licenses as an alternative to passports under the WHTI is a politically motivated initiative. Premier McGuinty is under pressure from constituents and business groups to derail or significantly modify the passport requirement. If he succeeds in getting the drivers' license accepted, he will score a public relations coup. The complexity of the preliminary plan, the overlapping jurisdiction of the provincial and federal authorities, and the MoT's technical problems make it unlikely that the secure licenses will be ready for use crossing the border anytime soon. END COMMENT.

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